



Federal Update for February 2 - 6, 2015



Klobuchar-Backed Bill to Prevent Veteran Suicides Passes Senate, Heads to President's Desk to be Signed into Law

An estimated 22 veterans commit suicide each day, adding up to more than 8,000 deaths each year

Klobuchar is an original cosponsor of the Clay Hunt SAV Act, which will help expand access to mental health services for veterans by establishing a loan repayment program to help the VA recruit more psychiatric specialists, enhancing resources for veterans transitioning to civilian life, and improving the VA's ability to address traumatic brain injuries

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) today announced a bill she cosponsored to prevent veteran suicides has passed the Senate and now heads to the President's desk to be signed into law. An estimated 22 veterans commit suicide each day, adding up to more than 8,000 deaths each year. Klobuchar is an original cosponsor of the *Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans (SAV) Act*, which will help expand access to mental health services for veterans by establishing a loan repayment program to help the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recruit more psychiatric specialists, enhancing resources for veterans transitioning to civilian life, and improving the VA's ability to address traumatic brain injuries. Congressman Tim Walz (D-MN) led the bill in the House.

"Our veterans served us on the front lines, and we must serve them with the support and resources they need when they return home," Klobuchar said. "Too many returning veterans are suffering, and too many tragically turn to suicide in

their darkest hours. We must do better. That's why Congressman Walz and I have continued to fight for this bill, and while there is still more work to do, today's action is one step forward in the effort to deliver veterans the suicide prevention and mental health care treatment they deserve."

Klobuchar has been a leader in the fight to improve mental health care for our nation's soldiers. She introduced the *Service Member Mental Health Review Act* in 2013 to help veterans who may have been discharged with improper mental health diagnoses get their records corrected and their benefits restored. She introduced the *Armed Forces Suicide Prevention Act* in 2008 to provide post-deployment services for troops and their families and help recruit more uniformed mental health professionals.

Online Prescription Tracker Gives Veterans 24/7 Online Access to Status

Veterans can now track the status of most of their prescriptions online, thanks to an innovative idea by a Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) employee. The new 24/7 service allows online tracking for most prescriptions mailed from the VA Mail Order Pharmacy.

The Prescription Tracker was recommended by VA employee Kenneth Siehr, a winner of the President's 2013 Securing Americans Value and Efficiency (SAVE) Award. Siehr's idea focused on the use of technology as a way to save money and improve the services VA provides to its patients.

"Our nation's Veterans deserve a first-class pharmacy and quality customer service as a part of the exceptional health care available from VA," said Siehr, the National Director for Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacies. "It is an honor to be part of serving Veterans and to have been recognized for an idea that enhances our services to them."

More than 57,000 Veterans are currently using the service through [My HealthVet](#), an online feature that allows Veterans to partner with their health care team. The number is expected to grow as VA starts to educate Veterans about the new feature. Later this month, the tracking feature will include images

of the medication that dispensed. Over the next year, a secure messaging alert will be added so that Veterans know when a medication was placed in the mail.

“VA prescription refill online is an excellent example of how one employee looked at the process of VA prescription tracking through the eyes of our Veterans and came up with an idea that better serves Veterans,” said Interim Under Secretary for Health, Carolyn M. Clancy. “This idea is both innovative and transformative, and it is certainly one, when put into action, improves customer service for America’s Veterans.”

MCRMC Update ► Health Care / Abolish TRICARE

The congressional commission has recommended a complete overhaul of the military health system — one that does away with Tricare, changes the medical command structure and seeks to improve Defense Department coordination with Veterans Affairs. The goal of the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission's recommendations, according to its final report released 29 JAN, is to preserve the quality of combat care that saved many troops' lives in Iraq and Afghanistan but also improve access to health treatment for those who use the system.

Under the recommendations, active-duty members and mobilized reserve component members still would receive medical care from the U.S. military, with easier access to specialty care in the civilian sector if they need it. But their family members, and retirees under 65 and their family members, would receive health care through commercial insurers, similar to the plans run under the Federal Employee Health Benefits Program. Active-duty families would receive an allowance to cover the cost of their insurance premiums, called the *Basic Allowance for Health Care*. Retirees below Medicare-eligible age would pay their premiums out of pocket, although at a lower cost than civilian plans as "recognition" of their service, commission members said. The program would be run from the Office of Personnel Management, just as the FEHBP is, negating the need for the massive Tricare contract management and oversight structure that now exists within the Pentagon, according to the report.

But this would not be FEHBP, commission members stressed, because that program does not provide options appropriate for military beneficiaries with their unique requirements, including the availability of military treatment facilities and

readiness demands, the commission wrote. "By moving toward private insurance, beneficiaries of the plan would have improved access to health care. ... It also solves some of the issues with mobilization and demobilization of reservists," said Bob Daigle, the commission's executive director. The move to commercial insurance would save active-duty families money, according to data provided by the commission. A family with no members currently qualifying for Tricare Young Adult could save, in 2014 dollars, \$457 a year if they decide to enroll in a health maintenance organization, \$493 a year if they opt for a preferred provider network plan and \$464 a year for a flexible fee-for-service plan. The savings would be even larger for families with adult children, because they would not have to pay premiums for Tricare Young Adult, since the Affordable Care Act mandates that insurers allow dependents to stay on their parents' plan until age 26 if the insured has no access to employer-provided care. For families who experience a catastrophic illness or injury, the commission recommended that DoD consider creating a program to help with those costs. To preserve the viability of military hospitals and clinics and preserve the skills of military physicians, Tricare Prime service areas — those regions within 40 miles of a military hospital or clinic — would be disbanded, and military family members, retirees and veterans with civilian insurance would be allowed to use military treatment facilities on a discounted basis to attract patients, including those with challenging medical conditions. "Allowing beneficiaries to choose from a selection of commercial plans ... would improve the health benefits for military beneficiaries ... [and also] create new tools with which DoD could attract patients to military hospitals," according to the report. Tricare for Life beneficiaries would continue to have the same access to care they now have, under the plan.

The commission also recommended that DoD create a four-star Joint Readiness Command led by a four-star flag or general officer that would lead much of the portion of the Joint Staff responsible for readiness, including a subordinate joint medical function run by a three-star. This structure, commissioners said, would improve coordination across the services in treatment, transportation and care for injured and ill troops. "Joint readiness today is at a high level because we've just been through more than a decade of war. This seeks to preserve that function," Daigle said. The recommendations also include changes to programs for beneficiaries with special needs, to more closely align them with state Medicaid programs — a codicil that advocates have pressed for in the past several years.

The commission also called for improving coordination between DoD and VA health services, to include creating a uniform drug formulary for smooth transition and monitoring of prescriptions, establishing standard reimbursement and complete the effort to create a joint electronic health record system. Members estimate that the changes to the health programs could reduce the Pentagon budget by \$26.5 billion from fiscal 2016 to fiscal 2020 and \$6.7 billion a year in savings by 2033. Commissioners said the savings would come from decreases in costs of providing health care benefits, decreased cost shares for some beneficiaries and increased cost shares for other beneficiaries, namely working-age retirees. Unlike the retirement portion of the report, which would apply to new recruits if approved by Congress, the health care portion of the recommendations would affect all family members, retirees and their families — except for those on Tricare For Life — once they were signed into law.

Joyce Raezer, executive director of the National Military Family Association, said she polled 20 military spouses shortly after the report's release and said most were "intrigued" by the recommendations, adding that the military system is in dire need of an overhaul, and in the absence of that occurring, the prospect of choice is appealing. "Generally, the option for choice in this arrangement ... they like that. The Tricare bureaucracy is cumbersome," Raezer said. But the spouses added they would need help understanding their options and choosing plans — the kind of information that cannot be provided only to the active-duty service member. They also wondered how such a system would work across state lines and overseas. "The biggest concern is about education," Raezer said. "We have been educating the whole country about health care with the Affordable Care Act right now. This means we'd need to educate retirees and family members." To read the full report go to <http://projects.militarytimes.com/pdfs/2015-report-compensation.pdf>. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime } Jan 29, 2015 ++]

MCRMC Update ► Shrink Retirement / Start 401K

A detailed proposal to revamp military retirement that was sent to Capitol Hill would shrink the size of future troops' pensions and end the 20-year, all-or-nothing aspect of the current benefits package by starting 401(k)-style investment funds with government contributions for lower-ranking troops. After a two-year study, the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission on

29 JAN publicly unveiled 15 major recommendations that would give individual troops far more control over shaping and managing their own retirement packages. One stunning feature of the new proposal is to give individual troops the option to forgo immediate monthly retirement checks and instead receive a lump-sum payment for the total value of their working-age retirement benefit between the time they leave service and the time they become eligible for their normal Social Security benefits, usually starting at age 67.

At its core, the new proposal would scale back the size of military pensions by 20 percent. Yet it preserves the current structure by continuing to offer the option of monthly checks immediately upon separation for those who serve 20 years. To supplement that diminished pension, the proposal calls for government contributions to a 401(k)-style investment account — matching up to 5 percent of base pay — as well as a new lump-sum "continuation pay" for troops who go beyond 12 years of service. According to the commission's calculations, the proposed retirement benefit's total value could be higher than the current system if service members contribute at least 3 percent of their basic pay and also their lump-sum 12-year continuation pay to their TSP account. The total value of the proposed package would be significantly lower for troops who chose not to invest portions of their basic pay and continuation pay.

However, the commission's proposal would not save the Defense Department a large block of money. If adopted, the commission projects this alternative retirement plan would save the Pentagon less than \$2 billion per year in the long run. That's less than 1 percent of the total Defense Department budget. The cost savings from the reduced pension are limited due to the expense of providing a new retirement benefit to troops who serve less than 20 years. Commissioners acknowledged that this proposal is not going to resolve the Pentagon leadership's concerns about rising personnel costs. "This is a small first step," said Larry Pressler, one of the nine commissioners who is a former congressman from South Dakota and a Vietnam war veteran. "This isn't going to solve the big issue." Commissioners emphasized that cost-savings was not their primary goal. Instead, they sought to modernize the current system and craft changes that appeal to today's generation of service members.

"The All-Volunteer Force increasingly comprises Service members born after 1980, members of the 'millennial' generation. Research has shown members of

this generation change jobs frequently and tend to favor flexible retirement options, rather than the defined benefit pension plans preferred by previous generations," the commission wrote in its 280-page report. The commission's changes could apply only to future recruits and would grandfather today's service members under the current system — but would give them the choice to opt in. For example, today's young service members who have no interest in staying for 20 years might choose to opt into the new deal and receive government contributions to their investment account. The commission surveyed more than 150,000 active-duty and retired service members last year to gauge their preferences on compensation. Extensive analysis suggests that the new proposal would meet the force's current recruitment and retention needs, the commission said.

Multiplier drops to 2.0. The proposal calls for reducing the "multiplier" used to calculate military retirement. Today's system calculates future pension checks by taking the amount of basic pay members receive in their latter years of service and calculating a percentage by multiplying the number of years served times 2.5. That means troops who serve 20 years receive checks equal to 50 percent of their final pay. The proposal would lower that multiplier from today's 2.5 to 2.0, a change that over time shaves of thousands of dollars in total payments. For a retiree who served 20 years, pension checks would reflect only 40 percent of his final basic pay. For example, an service member who retires at the E-7 paygrade after 20 years of experience would hypothetically under the proposed system receive a pension with an estimated value of about \$161,000, compared to \$201,000 under the current system, according to data in the commission's report. For an officer leaving after 20 years as an O-5, the proposed system would offer a pension valued at about \$569,000 compared to about \$711,000 under the current system.

12-Year Gate. One potentially big change included in the commission's proposal is to give the defense secretary the authority to modify the 20-year service requirement to qualify for a retirement pension. That all-important milestone of 20 years could be adjusted up or down for "an occupational specialty or other grouping of members, as defined by the Secretary," the report says. The idea of continuation pay is likely to be popular with service members. Troops who clear the milestone of 12 years of service would receive a lump-sum that will be at least 2.5 times one month's basic pay, and could range as high as 13 months' basic pay.

For example, an active-duty E-7 would receive at least \$10,000 and an active-duty O-4 would get at least \$17,000. The continuation pay would require agreeing to a four-year commitment, through 16 years of service. The services could raise the continuation pay in particular career fields where they want to retain people. In most cases, retaining officers at today's rate would require continuation pays that exceed 10 months of basic pay, according to the commission's report. Service members would be encouraged to immediately put that lump-sum payment in their TSP account, but would have no legal requirement to do so.

Lump-sum retirement. The plan would inject a new major decision into the lives of retiring service members. Those who clear 20 years and earn a pension would have the option of taking monthly checks just like the kind offered today, or to request a lump sum. The proposal sketches out two lump-sum options. Troops can give up all monthly payments until age 67 in exchange for a check equal to the value of those working-age retiree benefits. Or they can ask for a hybrid arrangement that offers half the value in a lump sum immediately upon leaving the service and the other half spread out in monthly checks. Regardless of their decision, the monthly pension checks resume at age 67 for all retirees, according to the plan.

Basic pay and matching contributions. The TSP element of the plan may be more controversial because it calls for automatically diverting a small percentage of basic pay into the savings account. Typically money deposited into a TSP is not available for withdrawal without tax penalty until age 59 and a half. Under the plan, troops arriving at boot camp would be enrolled automatically in the Thrift Savings Plan, the 401(k)-style investment account for federal employees. They would receive government contributions to that account, which they can keep when it vests after completing two years of service. Initially, the government contribution would be a modest 1 percent of basic pay. After that, service members with between three and 20 years of service would be encouraged to contribute their own money to the TSP and the government would provide matching funds up to 5 percent of basic pay. The automatic enrollment in the TSP would include diverting 3 percent of troops' basic pay into the savings account. If they want to change that contribution level, they can contact their financial office to raise it or lower it to zero. However, every January all service members will be re-enrolled for a 3 percent contribution. "The military is very accustomed to reinforced training and by doing this every year, hopefully we will condition their

thinking to the point where [they think] 'OK this must be a good thing,'" said Alphonso Maldon, the commission's chairman who is a former Army officer and former assistant secretary of defense for force management and policy.

Financial literacy. According to the commission's calculations, the proposed retirement benefit's total value could be higher than the current system if service members contribute 3 percent of their basic pay and their lump-sum continuation pay to their TSP account. The commission's survey showed that service members prefer options and want to have more control over shaping their own benefits package. The new proposal is underpinned with the hope or assumption that service members will make good, informed financial decisions and sacrifice short-term spending power for long-term financial security. But that flexibility also opens the door to financially risky decision-making. For example, a service member could choose to buy a family car with his or her 12-year continuation pay, which would reduce the long-term value of his or her investment account. Or, on a larger scale, a retiring service member could request his retirement benefit in a lump-sum check to start a new business. If that business goes bust, that retired veteran could be destitute just a few years after leaving the military. The commission acknowledged the issue in their recommendations and suggesting the Pentagon pencil in \$75 million annually to administer on-going financial literacy education programs for service members. Troops would attend annual classes on money management, according to the plan.

The commission's report is hardly the first proposed overhaul of the military retirement system. In 2011, the Defense Business Board, a Pentagon advisory group, published a detailed proposal that would have replaced monthly pension checks with 401(k)-style investment accounts. That suggested the government contributions should be at least 16.5 percent of basic pay, with higher rates for deployed service members or high-demand career fields. That plan went nowhere after it was criticized by service members, disavowed by the Pentagon leadership and landed with a thud on Capitol Hill. Last March, the Pentagon's personnel and readiness office broke its long silence on the topic and offered several detailed and complex alternatives to the current system: hybrid options that included both a TSP with government contributions as well as the promise of smaller, partial pension checks before traditional retirement age. That plan also included some lump-sum payments for troops staying at least 20 years, offering a "transition

pay" equal to as much as three years' basic pay. To read the full report go to <http://projects.militarytimes.com/pdfs/2015-report-compensation.pdf> [Source: MilitaryTimes | Andrew Tilghman | Jan. 29, 2015 ++]

MCRMC Update ► Congress & Advocates / Wary Of Panel's Proposals

None of the major changes outlined in the new military compensation report released 29 JAN can become law without congressional action, and the commission has drawn up proposed legislation that is ready for lawmakers to vote on, if they choose to do so. The report is likely to spark renewed debate about the military compensation system, which has changed little in the past 40 years. Senior Pentagon leaders say it is costly and unsustainable and will erode the Defense Department's ability to invest in weapons modernization and high-tech research. The commission was created by Congress two years ago to address some of those concerns.

Still unknown is how large the commission's impact may be. Many experts say real change is unlikely in part because the commission's proposals will not get fast-tracked to an up-or-down vote but will instead move through Congress' normal arcane procedures. Yet some veterans' advocates say Congress may be spurred to action by several factors, including budget pressures created by the across-the-board spending cuts known as sequestration. And it may prove easier politically to tackle this sensitive topic now that far fewer troops are deployed in combat zones overseas than just a few years ago. "You have this appetite for change just as long as it saves money. This has created this opportunity, if you could call it that, to give something like this ...little scrutiny and quick implementation," said Mike Hayden, the director of government relations for the Military Officer Association of America, which opposes curtailing military benefits.

One criticism that will swiftly emerge is that moving troops' retirement into individual investment accounts will saddle them with new responsibilities for managing money, with many lacking the requisite skills. So far lawmakers are viewing the massive document as a conversation starter, not a blueprint. That's fine with outside advocates, who are warning not to rush the complex proposals for overhauling military retirement and health care. "This is going to take a couple of years of hearings and analysis to do right," said Norb Ryan, president of the

Military Officers Association of America. "What we don't want to see is them mess up anything by moving too quickly on changes." Both the House and Senate Armed Services committees will hold hearings next week with officials from the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission, the launch of what both congressional panels say will be a lengthy review of military pay and benefits.

The report includes 15 recommendations, including an end to the 20-year, all-or-nothing military retirement system in favor of a 401(k)-style investment plan. Commissioners also are pushing to dismantle the military health care system in favor of a new health care allowance program for troops. Some Congressional leaders' initial reactions to the Commission's report were:

- House Armed Services Committee Chairman Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-TX) said on Thursday the committee's review will focus on how those changes would affect recruiting and retention, noting that "the services must compete with the private sector for talent." Neither he nor Rep. Joe Heck (R-NV) — who oversees the committee's personnel panel — offered comment on the specific proposals.
- Heck's counterpart on the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) said the recommendations underscore the need for reform, but he also declined to weigh in on specifics.
- Senate Armed Services Chairman John McCain (R-AZ) said he did not support the idea of "abolishing Tricare" but said he hadn't fully reviewed the commission's proposal yet.
- Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) also expressed concerns about the health care changes, indicating that issue could be a sticking point on Capitol Hill.

MOAA president Norm Ryan said he has concerns about many of the specifics in the report, especially a proposal to abolish Tricare. Unlike the retirement changes, which won't affect current troops or retirees, closing hospitals and changing medical access would have an immediate and possibly devastating effect on the military community, he said. He also expressed concern about some of the retirement investment plans, noting that his group will be closely eyeing provisions to boost troops' financial savvy before backing any such plan. Still, he said he sees the report as a critical conversation starter, one that he expects

won't simply end up unread on Capitol Hill shelves. "These aren't hairbrained ideas," he said. "This is a serious group of smart people, and there are a lot of plans in here that can help us for the future."

John Stovall, director of the American Legion's national security division, echoed that optimism. He noted that veterans groups briefed on the report early Thursday had concerns about many details but also optimism about the national conversation to come. "Getting rid of Tricare, I imagine, will be the proposal that sucks the most air out of the room," he said. "But many of these recommendations are immediately ready to be put into legislation and debated." Officials at Concerned Veterans for America praised the retirement and health care changes, saying both would provide "more choices and flexibility" to troops. VFW officials said "the devil is in the details" of the proposals.

Most observers tempered any expectation that Congress will be able to move quickly on any of the recommendations, even less controversial ones like expanding military child care options and updates to post-service education benefits. Mackenzie Eaglen, resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said the report instantly becomes "the authoritative source" for future reform, but added she thinks there is little appetite for action in the near future. "Part of the reason is ... because the Pentagon has chosen to cut end strength to ease pressure on personnel funding," she said. "This has bought both branches of government some time and given them breathing room to examine the issue for years, if they so choose." To read the full report go to

<http://projects.militarytimes.com/pdfs/2015-report-compensation.pdf>. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | Jan. 29, 2015 ++]

Sequestration Update ► HASC Chairman 2016 Priorities

This week new House Armed Services Committee Chairman, Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-TX), called for sequestration relief as one of his major priorities for the year, and warned Pentagon planners against proposing disproportionate cuts to military pay and benefits. "The problem with sequestration is not primarily about numbers and statistics," said Thornberry. "It is about whether we have the capability to do what the nation needs and the times demand. It is also very much about the increased danger that comes from diminished training, aging

equipment, and a tempo of operations that stretches our people and their families too far. It has to be fixed...That fix has got to pass the House of Representatives, it's got to pass the Senate, and it's got to be signed into law by the president."

The Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011 established automatic across-the-board budget cuts known as sequestration and continues to place America's national defense capabilities at great risk. During the 2011 deficit reduction negotiations, the administration agreed to reduce the Pentagon's budget by \$487 billion over a ten year period. The later enactment of sequestration added \$500 billion more in defense cuts. The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 mitigated the spending cuts only in FY 2014 and 2015. Sequestration returns in full force in FYs 2016-2021 unless current law is changed. DoD will have to cut an additional \$54 billion in FY 2016 and a total of \$269 billion over the following five fiscal years. The next two weeks promise to be a critical time for the military community. The Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (MCRMC) will release proposals to reform military compensation and health care in late January.

Thornberry warned Pentagon planners against "nickel and diming [military] people to death" with proposals to cut military pay and benefits. The Chairman expressed hope the MCRMC review could provide a forum for thoughtful discussion on the future of military compensation, as opposed to the yearly back-and forth battles between Congress and the administration. Thornberry's comments indicate he may oppose burdening servicemembers, retirees, and families with a disproportionate share of budget cuts, but the ensuing debate will be the true litmus test.

President Obama did not directly address sequestration in his 20 JAN State of the Union address, but his 2 FEB FY 2016 budget proposal is expected to include a fix. What's unclear is how the President might pay for budget relief. It could be through a combination of alternative spending cuts, closing corporate tax loopholes, and increasing the capital gains tax – all proposals laid out in his annual address. Such a plan may collide with a fiscally-wary Republican-controlled Congress, but it could serve as an important starting point for negotiations. Outgoing Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel added urgency to repealing sequestration: "The progress we have made will quickly evaporate if sequestration returns in 2016. We need long-term budget predictability and we

need the flexibility to prioritize and make the difficult decisions...we will not be able, this institution, to fulfill the commitments of the president's defense strategies with the kind of continued abrupt, steep, large cuts that sequestration will demand." Legislators on both sides of the aisle agree that sequestration's across the board cuts must be avoided. Congress succeeded in passing a bipartisan proposal to temporarily avoid sequestration in FY 2014 and 2015. Agreement on a way to fund a new fix remains elusive. [Source: MOAA Leg Up | Jan. 23, 2015 ++]

DECA Budget Cuts Update ► DoD Draft Budget Proposals

Many commissaries would have to cut their hours and days of operation — as much as two days a week, in some cases — under a draft Defense Department budget document that details proposed reductions in the commissary budget for fiscal 2016. The draft document obtained by Military Times presents various options for the Defense Commissary Agency to meet a DoD mandate to come up with \$322 million in annual savings — nearly one-fourth of DeCA's annual baseline budget of \$1.4 billion. Those options are under discussion as defense officials work to finalize their fiscal 2016 budget request to Congress, scheduled to be sent to Capitol Hill in early February. Because plans are still in flux and no final decisions have been made, a DoD spokesman declined to comment. One source said discussions are already ongoing about changes to some of the commissary proposals outlined in the document.

If last year is any indication, lawmakers may not be receptive to suggestions about cutting the commissary budget to such a severe degree. In their fiscal 2015 budget request, DoD proposed cutting \$200 million in DeCA funding, the first phase of a proposed three-year plan to slash the DeCA budget by \$1 billion. In the end, lawmakers restored that \$200 million to the budget. In the new draft plan for 2016, DeCA outlines \$183 million in operating costs cuts, to include paring back the number of employees per store by an average of six, down to 45. The 241 commissaries in the system now average 51 employees per store. Days of operation would be reduced at 183 stores, according to the draft. In one example provided, the commissary at Kaneohe Bay Marine Corps Base Hawaii would have its weekly operating days and hours reduced from seven days and 60 hours per week to five days and 49 hours per week. According to the draft, if the services

wanted to add more operating hours for a particular base outside the model DeCA would use, they would have to provide funding out of their own budgets to cover the costs. The draft document says the proposed reductions in operating hours would save more than \$29 million, while proposed cuts in days of operation would save \$58 million. But in addition to the \$183 million DeCA might save with these and other reductions, more drastic moves would be required for DeCA to achieve the remaining \$139 million in savings requested by defense officials — involving fundamental changes to the law that applies to commissaries.

In that regard, one of the subtlest but most far-reaching changes would remove from law the longstanding requirement that commissary items be sold "at reduced cost." Over the years, the commissaries have consistently touted the fact that patrons save an average of 30 percent compared to off-base grocery stores. According to an analysis of the legislative proposals, removing those three words — "at reduced cost" — from the law would be a recognition that "the commissary of the future will exist like a partially appropriated funded version of an exchange, rather than as an element of compensation." Instead, items would be priced at levels "sufficient to finance operating expenses" of the stores. Under current law, taxpayer funds cover operating expenses so that commissary items can be sold at lower cost.

The proposals already are raising alarms in some quarters. "This is a death knell for commissaries," said Tom Gordy, president of the Armed Forces Marketing Council, when asked about the proposals. He said the plan would be a "death knell" for the commissary benefit as generations of troops have known it. "If it moves forward, it's an indication that DoD is saying, 'We'll no longer provide this benefit — it's a business.' This is not good for military families," Gordy said.

Another legislative change proposed in the draft document would allow commissaries to sell beer and wine — everything that a commercial supermarket sells, except for distilled spirits. A number of other proposals in the draft document also would increase costs to customers if they become law, down to a 10-cent charge for each paper or plastic bag that a customer uses. Commissaries have been encouraging customers to bring reusable bags to the stores for years, and the stores sell such bags as well. [Source: NavyTimes | Karen Jowers | Jan. 23, 2015 ++]

DoD Suicide Policy ► 288 Active Duty Deaths in 2014

Suicides among members of the active-duty military personnel rose slightly in 2014, led by increases in the number of sailors and airmen who took their own lives, new Defense Department figures show. There were fewer suicides by Army soldiers and Marines, the two services that have seen the most combat in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last decade. According to preliminary Pentagon data, there were 288 (5.5 per week) confirmed and suspected suicides by active-duty personnel in 2014, compared with 286 in 2013. Both totals, however, represent a sharp drop from the 2012 number of 352. The data was obtained by The Associated Press. Over time the numbers may change, particularly if deaths that were initially believed to be suicides are found to be otherwise. The number of suicides by members of the active-duty National Guard and Reserve decreased a bit last year, after going up slightly in 2013. Those totals are included in the overall 2014 numbers.

A year ago, officials were a bit heartened to see the number of suicides in 2013 drop by more than 15 percent from 2012, but they have consistently warned that this is a very difficult problem to address. All of the services have beefed up programs to identify and reach out to troops who may have problems, encouraging service members to come forward if they need help and urging others to recognize and react to any signs of trouble in their unit colleagues. "We are working to better understand the trends and what they mean, but it's probably too early to know exactly why the numbers have risen," said Cdr. Chris Servello, a Navy spokesman. "Across the force we continue to educate sailors about warning signs, when and how to intervene and that it's OK to ask for help." Analysis by Pentagon officials has shown that more often suicides involve young, white men, usually married, using a non-military-issued gun. Many times the victims had reported family or relationship stress.

Military leaders have tried to create programs aimed at reducing stress and teaching troops about coping mechanisms and other tools to deal with daily pressures. According to the data, the number of Navy suicides increased from 43 in 2013 to 58 in 2014; Air Force suicides increased from 52 to 60. Marine suicides declined from 45 in 2013 to 35 in 2014, and Army suicides decreased from 146 in

1013 to 135 in 2014. According to the latest numbers available, the military suicide rate is sharply higher than the civilian rate. The civilian rate for 2012 was almost 13 suicides per 100,000 people. The military suicide rate for 2012 was 21.8 per 100,000. Military suicides hit a record high in 2012, at 352, but had begun a somewhat steady rise in 2006. [Source: The Associated Press | Lolita C. Baldor | Jan. 13, 2015 ++]

POW/MIA Update ► New Combined Agency Not Yet Named

In what was likely his last major policy move, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced 9 JAN the formation of a new agency to coordinate disparate efforts at accounting for and recovering the missing and dead from the nation's wars. The new agency within the Defense Department, which has yet to be given a name or a home headquarters, would merge the Defense POW/MIA Office (DPMO), the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), and several forensic laboratories under a new director to be appointed by President Obama.

Navy Rear Adm. Mike Franken, the former vice director for strategy at U.S. Central Command, will lead the new agency as interim director during the consolidation until a permanent director is named when the agency is fully operational next year. Air Force Maj. Gen. Kelly, McKeague, commander of JPAC, will serve as interim deputy director, and the Pentagon's oversight of the new agency will be led by Christine Wormuth, the Defense undersecretary for policy. Wormuth's chief advisor on POW/MIA issues will be Army Lt. Gen. Michael Linnington, a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan.

In a statement, Hagel, who announced his resignation in November and is awaiting the conformation of Ashton Carter as his replacement, said that the main goals of the new agency were to end the bureaucratic infighting that has plagued recovery efforts in the past. It will also seek to communicate and coordinate better with the families of the missing. "America will remain committed to always bringing home our missing and fallen," Hagel said. "The decisions we are announcing today will ensure we honor that solemn obligation." Last year, Hagel appointed a Personnel Accounting and Consolidation Task Force to review recovery efforts following complaints from the families and Congress over "dysfunction" in the management system. The non-partisan Government

Accountability Office also issued a report citing "long-standing leadership weaknesses and a fragmented organizational structure" within the existing structure of the POW/MIA accounting and recovery system.

Prior to the announcement, the interim leadership of the new agency met with veterans service organizations and representatives of family groups including Ann Mills Griffiths, head of the National League of POW/MIA Families. Griffiths said she was inclined to be skeptical but added that the changes outlined were "long overdue and hopefully there'll be a positive result." Bob Wallace, executive director of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, said after the meeting with Franken, McKeague and Linnington that they "want to listen, want to engage." There will be areas of disagreement going forward, Wallace said, "but at least we're dealing with credible individuals." More than 80,000 service members have been listed as missing since World War II, including more than 7,800 from Korea, and Hagel had been under pressure to meet a Congressional mandate that the Defense Department identify the remains of at least 200 MIAs annually by 2015. At national POW/MIA Day ceremonies in September, Hagel said that in 2014 the country had accounted for 71 service members from World War II, Korea and Vietnam, compared to 61 in 2013. "While this improvement is good, we must do better -- we will do better -- not only in more effectively accounting for our missing personnel, but also ensuring that their families receive timely and accurate information," Hagel said. [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | Jan. 09, 2015 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,539) Korean War (7,685), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,638), 1991 Gulf War (0), and OEF/OIF (6). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/accounted_for. For additional information on the Defense Department's mission to account for missing Americans, visit the Department of

Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) web site at <http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo> or call or call (703) 699-1169. The remains of the following MIA/POW's have been recovered, identified, and scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin:

Vietnam

- Capt. David Chorlins, U.S. Air Force, 602nd Special Operations Squadron, 34th Tactical Group, was lost Jan. 11, 1970, in Laos. His Skyraider was taking part in a night strike on truck traffic in the Mu Gia Pass when it was shot down. 1Lt Chorlins, age 24, was in a turn at 7,500 feet in preparation for his second pass when his craft was hit by 37mm AAA. The Spad caught fire and crashed before he had a chance to escape. He was accounted for Jan. 17, 2015. He will be buried with full military honors.
- Army Sgt. 1st Class James W. Holt, 26, of Hot Springs, Ark., was lost Feb. 7, 1968, in Vietnam. He was assigned to Company C, 5th Special Forces Group. He was accounted for Jan. 10, 2015. He will be buried with full military honors on a date/location yet to be announced.
- The Defense POW/MIA Office announced the identification of remains belonging to Air Force Capt. Richard D. Chorlins, 24, of University City, Mo., who was piloting an A-1 Skyraider aircraft on a night strike mission over the Mu Gia Pass in Laos when his aircraft was shot down by enemy ground fire on Jan. 11, 1970. He was assigned to the 602nd Special Operations Squadron, 34th Tactical Group. He will be buried with full military honors on a date and location yet to be announced.

Korea

- Army Sgt. Joseph M. Snock Jr., 21, from Westmoreland, Pa., was lost on Nov. 30, 1950, in North Korea, where it would be learned he died as a prisoner of war. He was assigned to Heavy Mortar Company, 31st Infantry Regiment. He will be buried with full military honors on a date/location yet to be announced.
- Cpl. C.G. Bolden, 2, U.S. Army, was a member of Company C, 1st Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, He was taken Prisoner of

War while fighting the enemy in South Korea on January 5, 1951 and died while a prisoner on April 30, 1951. He was accounted for Jan. 16, 2015. He will be buried with full military honors.

- The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) announced 16 JAN that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, unaccounted for from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Sgt. Gilberto L. Sanchez, 19, of New Braunfels, Texas, will be buried Jan. 23, in San Antonio. In late November 1950, Sanchez was assigned as a Medic to Medical Company, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT). The 31st RCT was deployed east of the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea, when it was attacked by overwhelming numbers of Chinese forces. On Dec. 1, 1950, remnants of the 31st RCT, known historically as Task Force Faith, began a fighting withdrawal to more defensible positions near Hagaru-ri, south of the reservoir. On Dec. 2, 1950, Sanchez was reported as missing in action. Between 1991 and 1994, North Korea turned over to the U.S. 208 boxes of human remains believed to contain more than 400 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents, turned over at that time, indicated that some of the remains were recovered from the area where Sanchez was believed to have died. To identify Sanchez's remains, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools including mitochondrial DNA, which matched Sanchez's sister and brothers, and Y-STR DNA analysis, which matched his brothers.
- The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) announced 20 JAN that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Marine Cpl. William S. Blasdel, 26, of Freeport, Ill., was buried June 9, 2014, in National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. In November 1950, Blasdel was assigned to Company H, 3rd Battalion, 11th Regiment, 1st Marine Division, when his unit was deployed south of the North Korean village of Yudam-ni on the western bank of the Chosin Reservoir. On November 28, Blasdel was in his forward observer

position near Fox Hill, when his position was struck by enemy mortar rounds. It was during these attacks that his unit was overwhelmed and began a fighting withdrawal south. Blasdel was presumed to have been killed in action during the attacks. In late 1954, Chinese forces repatriated unknown remains they claimed to have recovered from Blasdel's last known location. A military review board in December 1955, declared the remains as unidentifiable and the remains were transferred to Hawaii to be buried as unknown in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, known as the "Punchbowl." In 2013, due to advances in forensic science technology, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) determined that the possibility of identifying the remains now existed. The unknown remains were disinterred for analysis and possible identification. In the identification of Blasdel, scientists from JPAC used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, to include dental comparison and radiograph comparisons, which matched his records.

World War II

- Marine Corps Pvt. Jack M. Redman, 20, from Watseka, Ill., was lost on Nov. 20, 1943, during the Battle of Tarawa. Redman was born on 17 November 1923 in Detroit. His family soon moved to Watseka, Illinois where he lived through high school. Jack excelled in all sports at Watseka High School along with his three brothers Hobe, Gene, and Merrill. He was All State as a fullback and earned a football scholarship to the University of Illinois. After one semester at U. of ILL. he joined the Marine Corps in January 1943. As a member of Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines Jack spent time in New Zealand under intense training with the rest of the Second Division. His first combat action was the Tarawa invasion. He was killed on November 23, one of 9 Marines killed at Tarawa on the last day of the battle. His remains were never returned to the United States. His brother Hobe was wounded at Saipan and Gene was in the 3rd Division. He was accounted for Dec. 20, 2014. He will be buried with full military honors.
- The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) announced 26 JAN that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing since World War II, have been identified and are being returned to his family for burial with full military honors. U.S. Army Air Forces 1st Lt. James F. Gatlin, 25, of Jacksonville, Fla., will be buried Jan. 30 in Bushnell, Fla. On Dec. 23,

1944, Gatlin and his crew of five were assigned to the 575th Bombardment Squadron, 391st Bombardment Group, 9th Air Force and were deployed to Germany. Gatlin was a copilot of a B-26C Marauder that crashed after being struck by enemy fire while on a bombing mission against enemy forces near Ahrweiler, Germany. Gatlin and four other crew members were reported killed in action. His remains were not recovered during the war. One of the crew members parachuted from the aircraft but was captured and held as a prisoner of war by German forces. Following his release, he reported to U. S. officials that he had no knowledge of the fate of the remaining crewmen. Following the war, the American Graves Registration Command (AGRC) conducted investigations on the loss of Gatlin and his crew and successfully located the crash site, near Manderscheid and Bettenfeld. The remains of two crewmen were recovered. On May 27, 1999, a U.S. team investigating World War II losses in Germany visited a crash site near Bettenfeld. Two German nationals had researched the crash site and showed the team artifacts that were found and turned over remains collected from the site. Those remains were identified as Army Air Forces Staff Sgt. Joe R. Sanchez, 20, of Los Nietos, Calif. He was accounted for in March 2011 and returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Between 2011 and 2014, Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) teams traveled to Bettenfeld and conducted operations at the crash site. To identify Gatlin's remains, scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used forensic identification tools to include mitochondrial DNA, which matched his cousins. [Source: <http://www.dtsnnnnic.mil/dpmo/index.htm> Jan. 30, 2015 ++]